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Farmers in Afghanistan have harvested another bumper crop of heroin-producing poppies, but the Bush administration still cannot decide on a strategy to eliminate this new source of al Qaeda funding more than two years after the Taliban fell.

Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Afghanistan in April and told Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld that the opium-producing plant is a threat to stability, two officials said.

"I know he has raised those concerns with the secretary," said a senior defense official. "There is a general understanding that al Qaeda is raising money" from the drugs.

But officials say that given the political and security picture in the emerging democracy, it is better to leave the crop alone -- for now.

The following are among the drawbacks of ending poppy cultivation:

More than 80 percent of Afghans live in rural areas and a good portion of them live off poppy cultivation, especially in the south around Kandahar. There are no comparable crops that would bring in as much income.

The British, lead allies in counternarcotics operations in Afghanistan, attempted to persuade some farmers to grow the expensive spice saffron, but it never caught on. Afghanistan is the largest supplier of heroin for street sales in Britain.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is trying to create a security situation stable enough to hold elections in September. For this, he needs the support of warlords who control the poppy-growing areas. The warlords skim money off the drug trade as shipments move by donkey or vehicle. The fear is that the warlords would revolt if deprived of the drug money.

The Bush administration has all but ruled out the aerial spraying of herbicides to kill the poppy crop, as is done in Colombia by the State Department to kill the cocaine-producing coca. Not only would spraying enrage warlords, but it also is likely to harm farmers and their families because the poppies grow near farmhouses.

The U.S.-led coalition is relying on poppy growers as spies for information on movements of Taliban remnants and al Qaeda. Taking down the crop might alienate these sources of information.

"There is no easy answer," said a Pentagon official involved in counterdrug discussions.

"There's always been proposals to go after the crop" with no agreement on when or how to do it, the official added.

Military intelligence officers have collected a bounty of anecdotal evidence that an opium trade that once derived profits from Europe-centric traffickers now also is taking money from al Qaeda operators, who sell the drug for cash to fund terror operations.

"We don't know how much," the Pentagon source said. "But it doesn't take a lot of money for al Qaeda to do an operation."

The Afghan drug trade works roughly this way: The poppy sap is converted into a mash cake in rudimentary field labs and sold to black marketeers who pay off the warlords to move the packets out of Afghanistan. In Pakistan, the cakes are converted into opium and sold to al Qaeda operatives for resale.

Coalition ships this year have intercepted at least two drug shipments and detained persons linked to al Qaeda, the Navy said.

U.S. officials think that al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is turning to drug money as allies

shut off his traditional source of funds, such as Islamic charities and front companies.

Under Taliban's harsh rule, Afghanistan became the world's No. 1 producer of opium and its derivative, heroin, in the late 1990s. The Taliban eventually moved to stamp out the crop, but it has spread since the allies ousted the regime in December 2001.

"It seems clear to me heroin is the No. 1 financial asset of Osama bin Laden," Rep. Mark Steven Kirk, Illinois Republican, said after returning from a fact-finding trip to Afghanistan in January. "There is a need to update our view of how terrorism is financed. And the view of Osama bin Laden relying on Wahhabi donations from abroad is outdated. And the view of him as one of the world's largest heroin dealers is the more accurate, up-to-date view." Wahhabis are members of a strict Muslim sect that adheres closely to the Koran.

A United Nations' 2003 drug survey estimated that farmers and traffickers garnered \$2.3 billion from opium in Afghanistan, about one-half the country's gross domestic product.

"Out of this drug chest, some provincial administrators and military commanders take a considerable share," the U.N. report said. "The more they get used to this, the less likely it becomes that they will respect the law, be loyal to Kabul and support the legal economy. Terrorists take a cut as well. The longer this happens, the greater the threat to security within the country and on its borders Enormous sums of money are being made with impunity."

The United Nations estimates that 1.7 million Afghans in farming families, or about 7 percent of the country's 24 million population, rely on poppy income.

At a May 21 House Armed Services Committee hearing, Rep. Tim Ryan, Ohio Democrat, asked Gen. Myers a series of questions to determine the administration's plan for eliminating the drug trade financing al Qaeda.

But Gen. Myers offered no specifics. He said that the poppy crop this year came in early and that Britain is in charge of the problem.

"A strategy is being developed," Gen. Myers said.